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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/03/2013
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: WILL THE REAL FBL PLEASE STAND UP?

REF: A. CARACAS 01261
[1](#)B. CARACAS 02520
[1](#)C. CARACAS 02233
[1](#)D. CARACAS 01567
[1](#)E. CARACAS 02586

Classified By: AMBASSADOR CHARLES S. SHAPIRO FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) An August 8 Bolivarian Liberation Forces (FBL) press release asserted that the group defended Venezuela's sovereignty by attacking the Colombian National Liberation Army (ELN) July 31. Tachira state media, ranchers, and law enforcement officials told poloff August 5 and 6 that the expanding FBL are mostly to blame for an increase in kidnappings, which are becoming more violent, political, and urban, while opposition leaders allege links between the GOV and the FBL. Pro-GOV National Assembly Deputy Luis Tascon denied any GOV/FBL connection to poloff August 13. End Summary.

Where's the love? ELN Feuding with FBL

[1](#)2. (C) In an August 8 press release, the Bolivarian Liberation Forces (FBL) confirmed that its troops battled an ELN column July 31 to "defend Venezuelan territory" in western Apure state. They claimed the battle resulted in one wounded FBL fighter and five ELN casualties. The FBL rejected the allegation by unidentified military sources in an August 10 La Nacion story that "this battle is a product of a territorial dispute (for) extortion fees from Apure, Tachira, and Barinas ranchers." The release also claimed the ELN is blaming their kidnappings on the FBL and making alliances with "enemies of the Bolivarian revolutionary process," such as Apure Governor Luis Lippa, San Cristobal Mayor William Mendez, and Guasdalito Mayor Jesus Rojas. The accused officials have denied the claim. Lippa told all-news channel Globovision August 11 that he suspected the charges were "smoke and mirrors."

[1](#)3. (C) San Cristobal Police Chief Leonardo Iribarren told poloff August 6 that terrorist groups had previously respected each others turf as "leftist brothers," but this respect is breaking down, largely the fault of the FBL's "disregard for business." La Nacion newspaper president Max Vasquez asserted the animosity springs from an increasingly cozy FBL relationship with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and FBL intrusion into the ELN's extortion, kidnapping, and black market ventures. Vasquez claimed Colombian groups resent the attention the FBL's increased and sloppy kidnappings are generating. Tachira Businessman and Democratic Coordinating Committee (DCC) leader David Rubio

told poloff August 5 that trouble has been brewing between the ELN and FBL at least since December. The assassination of GOV-aligned Fatherland For All (PPT) party and alleged FBL leader Jorge Nieves April 26 was payback for cutting into the ELN's black market gasoline trade, according to Rubio (ref A).

The FBL's Expanding Network

14. (C) Vasquez said conflicts among terrorist groups are inevitable as the FBL grows in strength and operational area. He estimated the core group of 2,000 to 3,000 based in south Tachira and west Apure states is being augmented by a new group of at least 30 to 40 around the La Fria/La Grita area. (Note: FBL size is wildly speculated. DAO sources have estimates ranging from 200 to 2,000.) Machiques Mayor Alfonso Marquez told poloff August 6 the FARC and a new FBL group are in the early stages of partnership to transport drugs across the border near Machiques, Zulia state. He said the FARC established a cocaine laboratory last year on the Venezuelan side of the border that is operated at least partially by the FBL. He explained that Colombian military success was beginning to force a small amount of the FARC's narcotic refinement and production across the border.

FBL: New Kidnappers on the Block

15. (C) Vasquez said more kidnappings had occurred in Tachira by August 4 (32) than all of 2003 (29). He claimed the FBL is rightfully receiving the blame for the increase, adding that troubling trends in kidnapping methods have accompanied the new group's three year ascent:
--Political motives. The highly publicized July 25 kidnapping of former Tachira Governor and Christian Democrat (COPEI) leader Sergio Omar Calderon was a political, not an economic, crime, he asserted (ref B). Vasquez said at least three other kidnappings during the past year may also be politically motivated because victims had political connections and owned only small farms, not the large estate ranches that are typical targets. He suspected a deliberate attempt to "send a signal" that no member of old order is safe.
--Proximity to cities. Most kidnappings still occur in remote locations, but an increasing number are occurring closer to cities, even within city limits.
--Disguised. Dario Brillenburg was kidnapped from Zulia July 31 after his driver stopped for a police check. Terrorists disguised as National Guardsmen beat the driver and took Brillenburg. Police uniforms have also been used.

16. (C) Association of Tachira Ranchers (ASOGATA) President Genaro Mendez told poloff August 6 that ranchers used to pay extortion to a single group, but now many pay multiple groups and still get kidnapped. Another kidnapping trend is for common criminals to impersonate terrorist groups (Similar to an alleged scam in Apure, ref C). The National Guard and CICPC uncovered a ploy masterminded by a rancher's secretary to extort 12 million Bolivars using the name of fictitious FARC commander, according to Mendez. Police Chief Iribarren said extortions and kidnappings were largely confined to large ranchers out of his jurisdiction, but over the past three years San Cristobal businesses had been increasingly targeted with the advent of the FBL.

Alleged Links to GOV

17. (C) Vasquez and Tachira DCC leaders asserted that the GOV has links with the FBL. They claimed, for example, that the FBL is using a farm between Coloncito and La Tendida that is allegedly visited by high-ranking GOV officials as a training camp. DCC leader Jose Luis Rincon alleged that Infrastructure Minister Diosdado Cabello purchased the farm with state funds from Banco Industrial de Venezuela through an intermediary

two years ago. GOV-aligned National Assembly Deputy Luis Tascon (MVR) vehemently denied any government support of the FBL to poloff August 13. He demanded "liars trying to provoke a coup" produce evidence of supposed FBL connections. He said if any links exist with individual GOV officials, they are not reflective of the GOV or President Chavez's Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) party, which "do not recognize or respect any irregular military group." Tascon said he could not speak for the pro-GOV PPT party.

Comment

18. (C) Increasingly active and publicized, the FBL is making it difficult for GOV officials to deny its existence. It is, however, a group whose nascent and illicit character make it difficult to define from basics as to its size to definition of alleged links to the GOV of the FARC.
Shapiro

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